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Earth Pilgrim

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Introduction

I am an Earth Pilgrim, not a tourist. I walk in nature, not as an escape from the strain and stress of urban life, not for entertainment or sightseeing, not even as a scientist looking at nature as an object of study, I go in nature as a pilgrim for the renewal of my spirit. Walking in nature is my meditation and my prayer. The magnificent trees and majestic hills are my temples and cathedrals. I don't look above the sky to seek heaven; my heaven is here on Earth. Nature is my god and god is in nature. Nature does not belong to me, I belong to nature. Ancient Indian philosophers of Upanishads taught the world that all and everything is an abode of god. God is not out there separate from the world, somewhere in heaven, but here in the world; no separation, no dualism. Walking the earth, I realize and experience that divinity. Being one with nature, I am enchanted and enlightened.

Walking in nature came to me very early on in my childhood. My mother was a walker, she would say that if we go in a vehicle or even on an animal like a horse, we are fixed on reaching our destination and we lose our connection with everything along the way. Walking makes the journey itself the destination; there is no destination outside the journey. When you are walking you can look at the flowers and

appreciate them; look at the bees and learn from them; nature becomes your teacher, your mentor, your guide, your guru, and your god.

If you want to learn the lessons of restraint and the spirituality of sharing you can learn from the honey bee; as you walk you hear the bees buzzing, they are taking a little nectar here and a little nectar there; never too much. Never ever has a flower complained that the honey bee took too much nectar. I learned the lesson of restraint and frugality from the honey bee.

You can also learn the lesson of transformation from the honey bee; what does the honey bee do with the nectar it has taken? It transforms it into sweet, delicious, nutritious, healthy and healing honey. How many humans can do that? Humans take, take, and take until nature is depleted and they make, make, and make until nature has turned into waste and pollution.

From the honey bee you can also learn the lessons of networking. Bees are the greatest pollinators in the world; they connect the plants. They personify the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life.

Due to human activity bees are in danger of extinction. Some scientists believe that within a few years all the bees may disappear because of the depletion and pollution of nature. What will that do to human survival? No bees, no pollination, no plants, no oxygen, no life—no people!

As a pilgrim I can observe nature and connect with her on a deeply spiritual level. A tourist takes a picture with a camera; a pilgrim takes a picture in the heart. That was my lesson, which I learned from my mother.

No Money, No Food—A Peace Pilgrimage

Walking in nature, as well as walking to places, has become part of my way of life. At the age of 26 I decided to go around the world as a peace pilgrim. The inspiration came from Bertrand Russell; the 90-year-old Nobel Prize winning, Lord Russell. While he was protesting against nuclear weapons he was arrested and put in a British jail for breaking the law and “disturbing the peace of the Queen.”

When I read this news I was amazed. At that time I was in a café with a friend and I said to my friend: “Look, here is a man of 90 going to jail for peace in the world! What are we doing, young men sitting here drinking coffee? Let’s do something for peace, for Bertrand Russell, for the earth.” We talked and talked and in the end we decided to walk to Moscow, Paris, London, and Washington DC, the four nuclear capitals of the world. We felt very excited and happy, that was the best way to see the world and express our longing for peace.

Our guru, Vinoba Bhave, gave us his blessings and said: “If you are making a peace pilgrimage of the earth then go without money in your pockets. The root cause of war is fear. To make peace you have to eliminate fear and harbour trust in your heart. When you have money you can think that money will protect you and support you. But when you have no money you have to trust yourself, you have to trust people, and you have to trust God.”

“Not any money?” I asked in surprise.

“No money at all,” said Vinoba. “When you are walking you will be tired and exhausted so you will go to a restaurant to eat and a guesthouse to sleep. The next day you will walk away. But when you have no money you will be forced to find someone kind and hospitable to give you hospitality and that will open your channel of communication.”

In India the place of the guru is very important and following the advice of the guru is an essential part of that relationship. One cannot be a dilettante about the relationship with your guru. One cannot say, “I will take the advice of the guru only if it suits me and only if I like it.” To trust the world you have to trust your guru. So my friend and I accepted Vinoba’s advice.

We started walking from the grave of Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi and walked 8,000 miles to the grave of John F. Kennedy. That walking, across the continents, was a total antidote to tourism.

We came to the border of Pakistan. Many of our friends, family members and colleagues gathered together to bid us farewell. One of my close friends was worried and afraid. He said, “Aren’t you mad to go to Pakistan, walking, without money and without food? Pakistan is our enemy country; we had three wars between India and Pakistan! It is a Muslim country. I fear for your life. At least you should take some food with you!” And he produced some packets of food and wanted to

give them to me. I looked at the packets. I was bewildered. I thought for a moment, hesitatingly and then suddenly I heard an inner voice and said to my friend:

“No, I cannot take food with me. You are very kind and generous to think of my welfare but I will be betraying the advice of my guru if I carry food. These packets of food are not packets of food, they are packets of mistrust. What am I going to say to my Pakistani hosts? Am I going to say that I have brought my own food all the way from India because I did not know whether you will feed me or not? This is not a sign of trust. Please forgive me for refusing your kind gift, I am grateful, but I must adhere to my guru’s teaching about trust. A pilgrim’s journey is a journey of trust.”

My friend was in tears, he gave me a big hug:

“But why are you crying my friend?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Satish, if I will ever see you again! You are going through Muslim countries, Christian countries, capitalist countries, communist countries, through mountains, deserts, forests; you have no money, no food, no guidebook, no addresses. My heart goes out for you. I don’t know if you will return to India alive.”

I understood my friend’s fear and feelings, but I said to him: “My dear friend, don’t fear and don’t worry. If I die walking for peace that is the best kind of death one could wish for, so if I don’t return alive that is fine. But I must make this journey for peace in trust and please give me your love and blessing.”

He hugged me again, sobbing.

I said goodbye and walked into Pakistan. To my utter surprise, within a few minutes of my entering into Pakistan, I heard someone calling our names: “Are you Satish and Menon, the two Indians who are coming to Pakistan for peace?”

I could not believe my ears. I responded: “Yes we are, but we don’t know anyone in Pakistan. We have written to nobody and here you are, you know our names! You know the purpose of our journey!”

“Yes, I heard about your journey from other travellers who have seen you walking from New Delhi to here. I also read about you in our papers. I said to myself, ‘I am for peace. War between India and

Pakistan is complete nonsense,' so I wanted to come and welcome you. Please come to my home and be my guests. I want you to meet my friends and family and talk about peace. Please tell us how can we live together in peace?"

Now I was in tears. Five minutes ago my friend told me that I was going to an enemy country and here I was standing face to face with a so-called enemy and this enemy wants peace! I said to my friend, Menon: "If we come here as Indians we meet Pakistanis, if we come here as Hindus we meet Muslims, but if we come here as human beings we meet human beings. So from now on we will make our journey, not as Indians, not as Hindus, but as human beings. That is our primary identity. Indians, Hindus, Gandhians etc. are just the identities of convenience; they are secondary. Let us not allow those identities to undermine our primary identity."

As Menon and I were talking our Pakistani host said: "I live in Lahore, which is 16 miles from here. Please come with me in my car."

That request put us in a dilemma. We did not want to refuse his hospitality, but neither did we want to break our vow of walking. So we said: "We must walk, but please give us your address and we will certainly come to you by the evening."

He was reluctant to leave us and said: "How am I to know that someone else on the way will not offer you hospitality? I don't want to lose you. I have been coming here, searching for you for days. I came here yesterday and the day before yesterday, looking for you. I was wondering whether you had crossed the border somewhere else. Then I thought, there is no other border to cross, all other borders are closed. So I came today and I am so happy to find you. Now I don't want to lose you!

"No, we won't accept anyone else's offer of hospitality because you are the first to invite us. But we must walk, that is our vow. That is the way of the pilgrim. Touching the earth is the first step towards peace."

Instantly our host had a brilliant idea. He said: "It is hot and you don't want to carry your rucksack on your back. It is better for you to walk light, so please let me take your rucksacks in my car? That way I will be assured that, at least to collect your bags, you will come to my house."

We laughed; what a good idea! So we gave our rucksacks to our host and began our journey by stepping on the soil of Pakistan.

In the evening, as we were approaching the gorgeous Garden of Shalimar, just on the outskirts of Lahore, our host appeared, walking towards us: “It will be difficult for you to find our house so I thought I would come to meet you and guide you through the streets of Lahore.”

On the very first day of our journey outside India trust gave birth to peace and friendship between two Indians and a Pakistani family.

The experience was repeated again and again. We walked through the villages, towns, and cities. We walked through fields, forests, hills, and mountains. We walked in the night under the moonlight; we walked in the cool of the morning and also in the evening. We rested during the day, escaping from the heat of the sun. Sometimes we rested under the trees and sometimes in the shade of roadside restaurants.

As we were climbing the 3,500-foot-high Khyber Pass a car passed us. Then it stopped and it reversed, stopping near us. The driver, not a Pakistani, but a white man kindly asked: “Do you want a lift?”

We felt a sense of gratitude to such a kind offer, but sticking to our vow, we said: “No thank you, we are walking.”

The driver was puzzled; perhaps he had never experienced a refusal to a lift. He asked: “Where are you walking to? I am going all the way to Kabul. I can drop you wherever you are going.”

Hearing the American accent, I light heartedly said:

“As a matter of fact we are walking to the United States of America.”

The driver was even more puzzled and also intrigued. He actually got out of the car and said: “Gentlemen, do you know where the United States of America is?”

Smiling, I said: “We have never been there, but we believe that America exists. We have seen it on the map and we hope to discover it!”

The driver said: “I don’t believe you will make it to America walking, but here is my business card. My phone number is on it. If you ever

reach the shores of the U.S.A. please give me a ring. I will want to know that you have made it.”

We thanked him and kept the card in a safe place. When one has no money an address card is very useful!

We walked into the border of Afghanistan, over the Hindu Kush mountains and into the deserts of Herat and then into the even dustier, dry, and desolate desert of Iran. After 100 days of walking in Iran we walked through Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, along the Black Sea to the north, to Moscow, then Poland, Germany, Belgium, and France. Up to here there was no water so a kind French lady said: “You cannot cross the Channel on foot and you have no money so here are two tickets for the ferry.”

Resilience and the Human Spirit

Thus we crossed the Channel from Calais to Dover and walked to London where we met Bertrand Russell. We had written to him from India, when we were starting our journey:

“When I received your letter I did not believe that I would be alive to see you!” Then he laughed and said: “But you have walked fast enough and I am pleased to see you.”

After a long conversation and after narrating many of our stories, Bertrand Russell made a very practical point: “I wish you well in reaching Washington, D.C. However, you have no money and you cannot walk on water! Can we help you and arrange a flight to Washington?”

“It is kind of you, but we do not wish to fly. From walking to flying is too far. But we would be very grateful if you would arrange two boat tickets for us to New York. Then we will walk from New York to Washington.”

Then Bertrand Russell and other peace activists got us two tickets for the luxurious Queen Mary, a comfortable cabin to ourselves, seven days of crossing. The boat was big enough that we could keep our practice of walking and thus we arrived in New York.

En route from New York to Washington we came to the city of Philadelphia where the kind driver we had met in the Khyber Pass lived. His name was Dr Scarf so when we arrived in the city, we phoned him: “Do you remember the two Indians you met in the Khyber Pass?”

“Yes, I do. Where are they?”

“We are right here, in your city. We have made it. It took us two years; it was a slow journey and slow is peaceful.”

He was thrilled to hear from us and invited us to his house. He got many of his friends together, cooked a delicious vegetarian dinner and said to his friends that, “When I met these two travellers I thought they were crazy and that they would never make it to America. But I am happy to be proven wrong. I am impressed with the resilience of their human spirit.”

We walked to Washington, D.C. and ended our journey at the grave of John F. Kennedy. We had walked from the grave of Gandhi to the grave of Kennedy; from grave to grave. Graves made by the bullets of assassins. Graves made as a consequence of a violent culture. As long as we have faith in the gun we will have graves of Gandhi and graves of Kennedy. The gun does not only kill the bad guys, it can also kill the good guys. The good guys try to kill the bad guys and the bad guys try to kill the good guys – there is no such thing as good on one side and bad on the other. Good and bad go through every human heart and through the gun we water the seeds of violence. When we stop watering the seeds of violence we will have peace. That was the realization of my journey.

We cannot make peace in the human world unless we make peace with the earth, peace with nature. Humans and nature belong to each other, they are not two separate entities—humans are nature. The term ‘nature’ is the same as natal, nativity, and native and is related with birth. Everything that is born is ‘nature’; so human life and other than human life are part of one web of life. It was by walking the earth that I realized this unity of life and a sense of belonging.

When we were walking along the Black Sea we met two Russian women. We gave them our flyer that explained why we were walking and where we were going. The Russian ladies read our flyer and asked us: “Have you truly walked all the way from India?”

“Yes, indeed, we have.”

“How amazing! A Russian saint, Rasputin, went from Russia to India. Your journey sounds like a journey in return.”

“Thank you for that comparison!” We smiled.

“We work here in this tea factory. This is lunch break, please come and have a cup of tea. Please tell us the story of your walk.” They asked.

“Of course, anytime is tea time!”

So we went in, the ladies brought us cups of tea and bread and cheese and we started to talk. We could speak a little Russian and there was someone there who could interpret. As we were deeply engaged in conversation one of the women had a brainwave. She went out of the room and returned with four packets of tea, which she gave to us saying: “These packets of tea are not for you. If you want some tea I can give you some other packets.”

“For whom are they then?” We asked.

“I would like you to be my messenger and deliver one packet to our premier in Moscow, the second to the president of France in Paris, the third to the prime minister of England in London, and the fourth packet to the president of the United States of America in Washington. Please give them a message from me.”

“What is your message?”

“My message to them is this, ‘If you ever get a mad thought of pressing the nuclear button please stop for a moment and have a fresh cup of tea from this packet of Peace Tea. That will give you a moment to stop and reflect that nuclear weapons will not only kill your enemies, they will kill innocent men, women and children, they will destroy forests, rivers, lakes and mountains, they are no weapons of war, they will eliminate animals, birds and bees, they are weapons to bring an end to life, so do not use them.’”

What an inspiring message. From that day on we became the ambassadors of two Russian women carrying their message and the packets of Peace Tea. We delivered the first packet in the Kremlin where we were received warmly by the President of the Supreme Soviet on behalf of the Russian Government. However, when we wanted to

deliver the second packet to President De Gaulle in Paris we were refused. So we went to the Palais Elliséé and demanded to meet either the president himself or his representative to receive the packet of Peace Tea sent by the Russian women.

“The president has no time for peaceniks such as you. Please go away! In any case it is illegal to demonstrate in front of the Palais Elliséé; you are breaking the law.” We were told.

“We are not going to go away; we will stand here until we have delivered the Peace Tea,” we said.

We were arrested within half an hour of arriving and taken to a jail, a dreadful dungeon. However, we were happy to be there thinking of our mentor Bertrand Russell whose imprisonment had inspired us in the first place. We were following in his footsteps. After three days in jail we were met by the Indian Ambassador and the Chief of the French Police.

“The police officer will receive your Peace Tea and ensure that it will be delivered to the Palais Elliséé,” said the Indian Ambassador, “I am sure you will wish to continue with your journey and not stay in jail here. Otherwise the French government may deport you to India. You would not wish to be in such a situation!”

We agreed and thus were released. We managed to be received by the representative of the British Government in the House of Commons, with the promise that the Peace Tea would remain at 10 Downing Street for such an eventuality. Similarly we were received in the White House in Washington by a representative of the president. Thus we, the pilgrims, became the messengers of peace.

Conclusion

Our journey had a particular purpose, and all journeys can have their own individual meaning and motivation. However, every journey is a journey to connect with people, to connect with the planet, and to connect with one’s self.

What did I learn from this pilgrimage to the earth? I learned that peace among humans is only possible when we make peace with nature. Present human behaviour is so aggressive towards the natural

environment that it appears as if we are at war against Gaia, Mother Nature. The way we poison the land, pollute the air, contaminate water, slaughter animals, and waste energy are clear signs of our war-like actions to conquer nature. No wonder nature is reacting and taking revenge in the form of global warming and climate change.

If we want to bring about solutions to the environmental problems and make peace with nature then we have to bring about a transformation in our attitudes to all living things on the earth. For example, at the moment everybody is talking about global warming but global warming is not the problem—it is only a symptom of the problem. We need to go deeper than just to talk about treating the symptoms. It is a characteristic of modern times to look at the symptoms, rather than to tackle the real reasons and underlying causes.

Sir Nicholas Stern has written a 600-page review on climate change but it does not go deep enough into the reasons which are the cause of climate change. Stern never asks, “How did we manage to reach the stage where we are sawing the branch off the tree upon which we are sitting?” The answer is that we have lost the sense of the sacred and the idea of the spirit and we have just concentrated on matter; we have become wedded to the religion of materialism. But matter is no matter unless it has spirit. Matter on its own is useless. A human body is made up of a head, arms, and legs, but it is of no use without the human spirit; the body serves no purpose unless it has a spirit to bring it to life. The loss of spirit is at the root of environmental problems and global warming is only a symptom.

In the last few hundred years a number of Western philosophers and scientists such as Descartes and Newton saw the earth as a lifeless machine for human use and dominance. We have come to believe that humans are the master race, the super species in charge of the earth. Over the years we have tried to rid ourselves of many of the ‘-isms’, such as imperialism, nationalism, and sexism, but now we are in a world of species-ism where we think that the human species is special and that humans are in charge of all other species. We used to own slaves but now we own nature; nature has no rights and we can claim possession of natural things wherever and whenever we want. But the moment we have a different world view and we see nature not as dead matter but as a living force, full of intelligence and spirit then suddenly we are in a deep relationship with the natural world. Then we recognize that nature is alive and her rights are equal to human rights. Such recognition is prerequisite to peace. To make peace with nature we need to identify with nature.

We are part of nature and not owners of nature. We do not own the trees, the land, and the rivers; we have a relationship with them.

The idea, prevalent in modern economics, that we human beings own nature and can therefore treat her as we like, is fundamentally flawed. Unless we can change this idea and make a fundamental shift from the ownership of Nature to a relationship with Nature, global warming will never cease. Even if we change from burning fossil fuels to generating power in other ways—whether wind power, solar generation, nuclear energy, or biofuels—all we are doing is treating the symptoms. If we think we can control the rivers, the animals, and the rainforest based on the ideas of separation from and ownership of nature, then all our efforts towards sustainability are just an illusion. Technological solutions have to be balanced by spiritual transformation.

The idea of ownership is rooted in materialism whereas the notion of relationship is rooted in spirituality. There is a big difference between ownership and relationship. There was a time when men thought they could own women. We have managed to change this idea and we now know you cannot own your wife; it is a relationship not ownership. There was also a time when people owned slaves and wealth was measured by the number of slaves in a household. But the idea still remains that the forests, land, and the animals are our slaves. We put animals into factory farms and cages. We treat them and use them as we like. As long as this materialistic mindset—this anthropocentric view—continues, global warming is not going to go away.

We need to make a quantum leap from an anthropocentric worldview to a geocentric worldview. We need to accept the intrinsic value of all life, human life as well as other than human life. The human community is part of the Earth community. Economy has to operate in harmony with ecology.

This change of worldview as well as a change of heart has to come about from the bottom up, from the grassroots. We have to build a people's movement to create a culture of spiritual ecology and spiritual economy.

We can live in an illusion thinking that governments should do something about global warming but the reality is that the world will never be free of global warming unless we change our relationship with the earth. We are Pilgrims of the Earth and we should be the friends of the earth. The Buddha was the first friend of the earth. He gave up all

his possessions to sit under a tree and said that we are all related to the earth. The whole earth is our family; all creatures are our kith and kin.

The climate change agenda is driven by fear in the same way as nuclear disarmament movement was driven by fear. When I met Bertrand Russell I said: “Lord Russell, you are my inspiration but I have one problem with your philosophy, and that is that your agenda on nuclear war is driven by fear.”

The same is happening with the mounting public awareness of climate change—it is driven by fear, fear of the loss of the consumerist way of life and of our material possessions. It is fear that is driving much of the environmental movement. As I pointed out to Bertrand Russell “peace is a way of life. Peace does not come from fear of nuclear weapons.” In the same way sustainability is also a way of life. It is not something we do just to save our possessions or to save our economy. We have to move away from the mindset of fear. Our environmentalism should be inspired by love of life, love of communities, love of people, love of the earth, and love of nature. The Buddha was an environmentalist 2,600 years ago before there was any global warming; he sat under a tree seeking enlightenment and said “We must have love for the tree.” But today we don’t sit under the tree; instead we think: “How can I use the tree for my profit, how can I make money from it, or how can I use it to build my house or make my furniture?” For the Buddha, the tree was sacred, it had intrinsic value, but for Western civilisation it is just a material object.

As an Earth Pilgrim I am not responsible to save the earth or save civilization, I am here to celebrate the earth—that is the reason I am an environmentalist. We do not want to save the earth because of our fear of global warming but because of our love for the earth. The love of life is a greater force than the force of doom and gloom. We need to make a shift from the force of fear to the power of love.

From the spiritual perspective the relationship between every living plant and creature is part of a delicate balance; worms are sacred for without them to condition the soil there would be no food, so we must respect worms. Once we have such reverence for the earth and all her creatures then all our social systems will naturally be sustainable.

The world’s approach to climate change is all about treating the symptoms. Everyone is jumping onto this bandwagon. They have not learned to love the earth; rather they are consumed by the idea that

climate change will provide them with new business opportunities for economic growth. They are enthralled by the mantra of “economic growth, economic growth, economic growth.” I prefer my mantra which is “Earth I love, Earth I celebrate, Earth I enjoy.” And to enjoy the gifts of the Earth we must look after her, care for her, and revere her.

Economics of course has its place but must be kept in its place and not be allowed to dominate. ‘Ecos’ is the Greek word for home, ‘logos’ means knowledge, and ‘nomos’ means management. If we don’t know our planet home, how are we going to manage it? Therefore ecology comes first. Once we realize the subservient place of economics to ecology then global warming will go away. Global warming is caused by the dominance of economics and by globalization. As Einstein told us, we cannot solve a problem with the same mindset that caused it in the first place.

We need to aim for something better than endless economic growth. And what happens to the trillions of dollars that economic growth has created? We see it spent on war or on the weapons needed for war. There is no guarantee that the fruits of economic growth will be shared for the well-being of all people and the planet. Much economic growth is misused to bring misery and waste. Money beyond a certain limit can be a burden; it can bring unhappiness, and worse, poverty and exploitation. Money is not real wealth. The earth is the true source of our wealth. The middle way is the ideal to aim for, where there are no extremes of wealth and poverty because as long as there are wealthy people there will be poor people. If we truly want to make poverty history, we also have to make wealth history. A state of balance, equity and equanimity is the source of peace among people and with the earth.